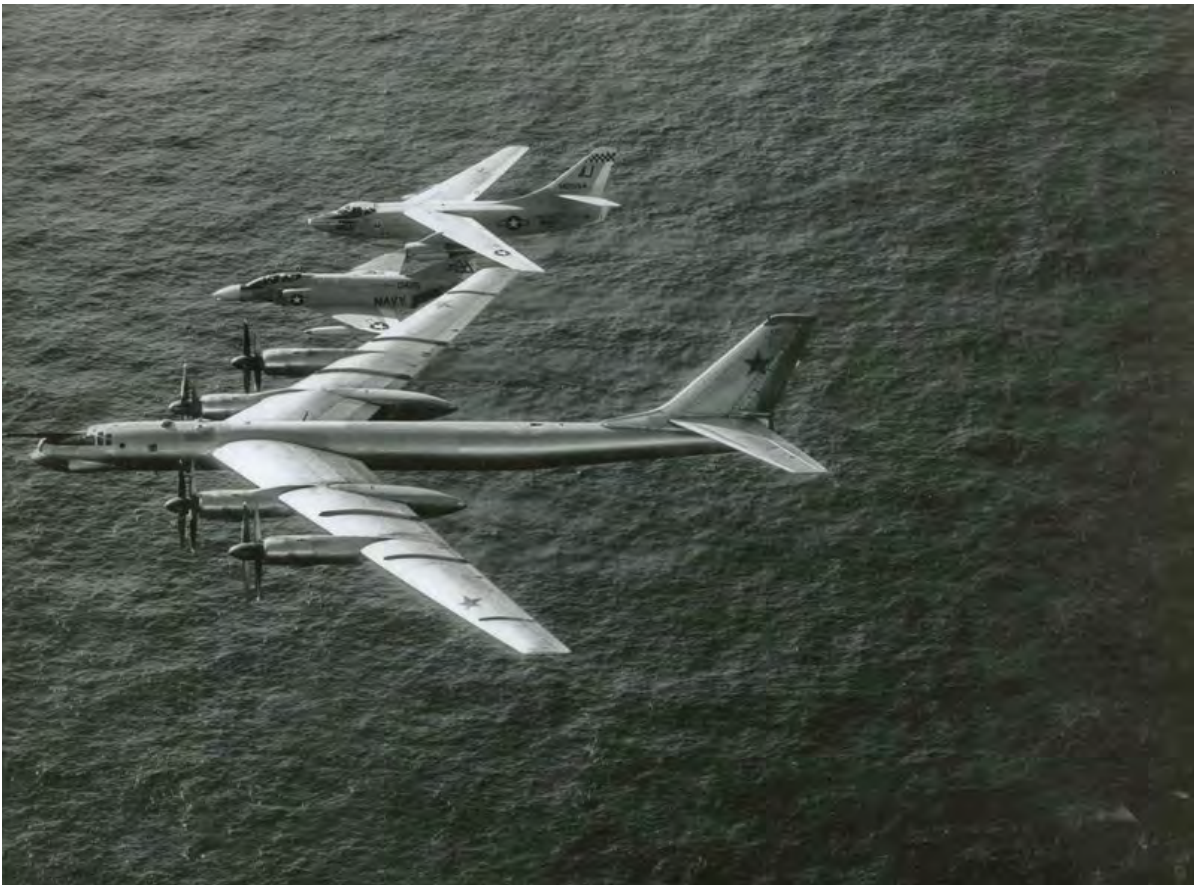


Eye to Eye with a Bear

In 1966, a Naval aviator got an unforgettable look at an icon of the Cold War: the Soviet Tupolev Tu-95 bomber

Air & Space Magazine

John Newlin



In a photo he calls "The Sandwich," John Newlin flies his Phantom between a Soviet Tu-95 Bear and a Douglas A-3 tanker 150 miles west of Gibraltar, April 1, 1966. (Courtesy John Newlin)

In March 1966, I was operations officer of Fighter Squadron 74 (VF-74) aboard the aircraft carrier Forrester. After a long deployment in the Mediterranean Sea, the ship set a course for its home port, in Norfolk, Virginia. As soon as we'd cleared the Strait of Gibraltar, the ship went on "Bear Watch."

"Bear" is NATO's designation for the Soviet Tupolev Tu-95, a large strategic bomber, sometimes armed with missiles but primarily used for electronic surveillance. Powered by four Kuznetsov NK-12 engines driving contra-rotating propellers, the Bear is an unusually loud airplane: The tips of the blades on those propellers rotate at supersonic speed, creating an unholy racket. The Bear went into service in 1956, and the design remains in use by the Russian Air Force even today.

Bear Watch was a mission requiring two VF-74 F-4 Phantoms, two VMF-451 Marine F-8 Crusaders, a VFP-62 F-8 photo aircraft, and a VAH-11 A-3 tanker. All were manned during the daylight hours on the flight deck. The Phantoms and the Crusaders were hooked into the ship's catapults, ready to launch within five minutes of the order. Our flight crews manned the "Alert Five" birds on the catapults for an hour at a time. Each evening, it was my job to write and post the schedule for the next day's Alert Five crews.

One evening I was in the squadron ready room making out the next day's schedule when the officer in charge of the Forrestal's highly classified Supplemental Radio section dropped in. We were both bachelor lieutenants; we'd become buddies exploring the bars and cafés of La Rambla in Barcelona, Spain. He told me two Soviet Bears were expected in the vicinity of the Forrestal around noon the next day. They would take off from Murmansk, Russia, just before dawn, and would refuel over the Faroe Islands before continuing south to overfly the Forrestal. Unable to resist the chance to spot a Bear with my own eyes, I scheduled myself and radar intercept officer Nick Estabrook, one of the squadron's best F-4 backseaters, for the 12 p.m. to 1 p.m. Bear Watch.



In a memorable cold war encounter, the author (with his F-4B Phantom on the deck of the Forrestal) flew uncomfortably close to a Soviet bomber. (Courtesy John Newlin)

The next day, Nick and I climbed into our F-4B just before noon. The Phantom was armed with two AIM-9 Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles and two AIM-7 Sparrow radar-guided missiles. In the cockpit on the deck, time passed slowly. I began to worry that either the Bears were late or the intelligence on their flight was wrong.

Then, with just 10 minutes remaining on our watch, our commanding officer walked up to our aircraft. As he approached, the air boss called out on the flight deck public address system, "Rank has its privileges, John!" My C.O. looked up at me and asked, "Would you like to be relieved early, John?" Ha! Apparently he didn't have the nerve to order me out of the cockpit. Something was up.

I politely refused, and I will never forget the 60 seconds or so that followed. The skipper didn't know what to do. He stood there on the flight deck, shifting his weight from foot to foot. When the order "LAUNCH THE ALERT FIVE" came booming from the P.A., Nick and I closed our canopies, I started both engines, and we were off. See ya, Skipper!

The rules of engagement were very strict: We were to intercept the lead Bear as close to 100 miles from the ship as possible. Nick turned on the radar, and we made contact with the Bears immediately. The blips on Nick's scope were so large they looked like bananas, he told me. He skillfully guided us through an intercept course that placed us on the starboard side of the lead Bear 98 miles from the Forrestal. Our wingman was positioned on the second Bear, which was in a 1.5-mile trail from its leader. The Marine F-8s remained clear. But one A-3 tanker pilot decided to get a closer look.

The Tu-95 has a pair of large, plexiglass blisters located at the rear of the fuselage, under the horizontal stabilizers. As we pulled up alongside the Bear, I noticed in the blister a crewman with a large, folding bellows camera on a tripod. He began signaling with his hands—it was evident that he wanted me to position our aircraft for a photo-op. I played along, and when our F-4 was in the optimal position, the crewman ducked under the camera hood. He emerged seconds later and gave me a vigorous thumbs-up.

Ironically, while the Bear crewman was taking our picture, Nick was taking his. The Forrestal's intelligence officer had supplied Nick with a state-of-the-art 35-mm camera that captured 72 images on a regular 36-frame film cassette. Nick used all 72 frames.

The lead Bear was a variant known as a Bear-B. The Bear in trail was a Bear-D, an electronic surveillance version distinguished by two long pods located on either side of the fuselage, just ahead of the tail section. It was obvious the D's mission was to analyze the radar and communications signals from the Forrestal and its airborne aircraft.

After the photo-op, I pulled up close and adjacent to the Bear's outboard engine. Unknown to me, the A-3 tanker pulled up close on our starboard wing. I call the photograph above "The Sandwich." Nick was unnerved that our aircraft was tightly sandwiched between two very large and less maneuverable ones. It bothered me less because I had to focus on maintaining our position on the Bear, and I couldn't see how close that A-3 was. Every time I look at that photo I wonder: If I had lost control and collided with the Bear, would that have triggered WWII?

The risk of that mishap was actually quite low. I'd had plenty of experience flying close wing on another aircraft. One thing I distinctly recall was the intense vibration of the canopy when I positioned my head directly abeam of the gap between the Bear's counter-rotating propellers.

About 20 miles from the Forrestal, the Bears initiated a slow descent from their 33,000-foot cruising altitude. The pair flew over the carrier at 1,500 feet, then began a slow climb to the north. We stayed with the lead Bear until we were again 100 miles from the Forrestal. When I signaled to the copilot that we were breaking away, he dropped his oxygen mask and gave us a big Russian grin and a thumbs-up. For about an hour that day, we weren't cold war enemies—just airmen enjoying the shared good fortune of flying some pretty awesome aircraft.